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ABSTRACT

Today's collegiate forensic activities have changed in ways that pose profound challenges to directors of forensics. Six primary factors that contribute to the "at-riskness" of directors of forensics are: the changing face of today's forensic program forces difficult choices; the forensics community is seeing signs of a crisis in forensic education training; directors of forensics face unique challenges as professional educators; travel, time, and tournament logistics can diminish the enthusiasm and motivation of forensic educators; directors of forensics face profound challenges to their social lives and relationships; and institutional support contributes significantly to the satisfaction of forensic educators and stability of programs. Steps that can be taken at both individual and activity levels to curb the potential for burn-out and dissatisfaction among forensic educators are: forensic professionals must be adequately trained; institutions should maintain evaluation measures that acknowledge the unique responsibilities of the forensic educator; forensic programs should have sufficient staff and resources; standards and policies can provide structure and efficiency to forensic programs; a shorter forensics tournament season will curb potential burn-out factors; directors of forensics must work to ensure that their professional lives do not dominate their personal lives; and directors of forensics need to make wise choices and be cognizant of the implications of their choices. (Contains 32 references.) (RS)

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Preserving the Pedagogy:

The Director of Forensics as an At-Risk Professional

Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the
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When I reflect back on my collegiate forensics competition in the early 1980's I remember an activity very different from today's forensics world. As I recall, tournaments let students compete in both individual events and debate. Events were held in two days. Debaters carried index cards in card boxes--sometimes on a small luggage cart. Budgets were modest. The activity seemed more like an intimate group of people with common interests who gathered each weekend...sort of a knitting circle of arguers, speakers, and performers.

Then came the transition. At some point forensics changed. The arguments continue as to how our activity has evolved. Whether one focuses on the evolution of debate theory, the breadth of individual events being offered, the number of organizations vying for membership, or other areas, the evolution of forensic activities has changed the role of today's director of forensics. As the activity grows more complex so too does the profession of forensic education.

Today's collegiate forensic activities have changed in ways that pose profound challenges to directors of forensics. While not every forensics educator faces the same challenges, there are enough common characteristics of forensics at the end of the 20th century that lead to a categorization of the director of forensics as an at-risk professional.

Defining the At-Risk Professional

Hunt, Garard, and Simerly (1997) offer an excellent review of literature regarding what is constituted by "at-risk." In studying debaters as an academically at-risk population, they note that "several competing definitions of at-risk populations exist in the literature" (p. 48). What is most relevant about Hunt, Garard, and Simerly's treatment of at-risk status for this paper is the extension of at-riskness to interactive models. Unlike previous models for at-risk status, "the interactive approach examines the construction of at-riskness within a given context" (p. 49).

The discussion of directors of forensic as a professionally at-risk population falls within the interactive realm. The significant factors contributing to potential burn-out or dissatisfaction of forensic directors are environmental--not epidemiological. Hunt (1993), highlights two main reasons for burn-out problems among CEDA educators. These two reasons are not unique to CEDA, but can be framed as the two biggest environmental problems contributing to the at-riskness of today's directors of forensics:

> One is hiring unqualified nonprofessional people as directors of forensics or debate educators in the first place. The second cause is a stressful job environment that makes a forensics career difficult by accentuating negative job conditions without a balancing of positive factors. These two causes of burn out often join together in an interactive effect with ends the careers of many potential CEDA educators (p. 169).

A search for literature that falls under the heading of "at-risk" reveals articles ranging from individuals coping with extreme

health conditions to students who risk failure in school. In all cases, at-risk populations face challenges to succeeding or surviving, despite a will and innate ability to do so.

Why, then, are there grounds for defining directors of forensics as an at-risk population? Bartanen (1996a), in the introduction to her preliminary assessment of the professional climate of forensic education, writes:

> Intercollegiate forensics faces many challenges in the years ahead. Among them is the important task of strengthening professional support for forensic education (p. 1).

Bartanen offers empirical support for claims that forensic educators perceive challenges in their lives unique to their professional roles. Change poses challenges to those who are forced to experience it. The impact of recent changes in forensics on its participants and programs has been well documented (Jensen, 1997; West, 1997; Preston, 1997; Alexander, 1997; McGee and Simerly, 1997; Biles, 1997; Backus, 1997; Jensen, 1993; Hunt and Inch, 1993; Burnett-Pettus and Danielson, 1992). Frequent weekend travel to tournaments that feature doughnuts, caffeine, fast food and 16 hour days also contributes to challenges that place directors of forensics at risk (Littlefield and Sellnow, 1992). Finally, several articles allude to the potential for burnout and stress among forensic educators (Preston, 1995; Hunt, 1993; Murphy and Ferri, 1991; Gill, 1990). In short, there is ample reason to address the potential for directors of forensics to be at-risk professionally.

Factors Contributing to Professional At-Riskness of Directors of Forensics

Few professions necessitate the diverse talents and time demands of the forensic educator. Keele and Andersen (1975) write that "forensics educators must be as eclectic as any of their colleagues; few faculty members must be conversant with so many areas in order to tackle one specific teaching assignment" (p. 143). While a number of factors contribute to the at-riskness of directors of forensics, six primary contributing factors are discussed herein.

1. The Changing Face of Today's Forensic Program Forces Difficult Choices

As has already been discussed, forensics has and continues to undergo significant change in terms of what constitutes the average program. In 1992 Burnett-Pettus and Danielson observed that "broad programs may be threatened by coach burnout" (p. 17). While Jensen (1993) found that most programs in the early 1990's competed in both individual events and debate, nearly three-fourths of these programs had the same staff coaching both types of events. In 1997 the scene has changed. In a review of the 1997 Intercollegiate Tournament Calendar, Jensen (1997) found that a majority of tournaments offer only one type of competitive opportunity (debate or individual events), while most that do offer multiple opportunities limit debate options to parliamentary and NFA Lincoln-Douglas. Directors are being forced into choices between events as a result of the changing climate. West (1997) articulates the pressures of today's broad-

based director of forensics when he asks, "Are students well-served by a director of forensics who is often under tremendous stress?" (p. 266). McGee and Simerly (1997) note that the proliferation of opportunities forces today's forensic educator into difficult choices. They write that "in an era of forensics specialization, no program or program director can do all things well" (p. 282). They further assert that "the limits of available coaching demand some program specialization, since the continued availability of forensics funding at many institutions is too frequently contingent on occasional competitive success' (p. 282).

2. The Forensics Community is Seeing Signs of a Crisis in Forensic Education Training

Gill (1990) warns us of the paramount importance training has on the future of forensic professionals when she writes that the "lack of adequate training will result in a shorter time spent coaching" (p. 186). The imperative facing us, then, is to provide effective training to tomorrow's directors of forensics. Unfortunately signs point to inadequate training of many of today's forensic educators, and a structure that may well perpetuate the problem.

Most of today's forensic educators lack any "graduate coursework in the philosophy and methods of directing forensic programs" (Bartanen, 1996a, p. 4). Many of today's forensic professionals perceive that coaches lack adequate training necessary for them to do their job (Jensen, 1993). Hassencahl (1993) highlights one structural cause of this poor training:

the lack of doctoral programs offering courses in directing forensics. On a related note, Bartanen (1996a) found that most of today's forensic educators "did not expect to be coaching forensics more than five years from now" (p. 17), and that an overwhelming majority of those educators plan to leave the activity before the end of the century. In his 1997 National Developmental Conference on Individual Events paper, Workman crystallizes the relationship between professional longevity and training when he writes that "substantial evidence exists correlating the decline of long-term careers in forensics education to improper or non-existent training of those pursuing such a career" (p. 3).

3. Directors of Forensics Face Unique Challenges as Professional Educators

Keele and Andersen (1975) argue in the proceedings from the First National Developmental Conference on Forensics that "forensics educators should not be evaluated in terms of the identical criteria applied to their colleagues" (p. 145). They add that "the persons involved should be given credit for and evaluated in terms of the specific requirements of their jobs. The failure to do so is one clear reason for the exodus of good forensics personnel as a means of professional survival" (p. 145). In a more recent study, Bartanen (1996a) found "that most forensic educators are expected to teach and engage in scholarly activity at a level of quality comparable to their colleagues" (p. 9). However, Bartanen also found that most of these same educators perceive themselves to have less time to be effective

teachers, and limited time for scholarship and service.

Professional challenges that face the director of forensics extend beyond their professional evaluation. As Bartanen's research indicates, it is increasingly difficult for forensic educators to pursue other ventures beyond "normal" expectations. Logically, if the forensic educator is spending several weekends at tournaments and their weekdays in the office performing their usual professional responsibilities, not much time is left for other pursuits. Bartanen (1996b) found that a large number of today's forensic educators feel that the activity limits their involvement in personal and professional activities. She cites one survey respondent:

> I have to make choices--probably I am most disenfranchised from the academic community. This may be problematic if the people I do spend time with (other coaches) follow the trend and are less likely to be PhDs and MAs and are just 'hired guns.' I really miss the opportunities to socialize with other communication scholars because I travel (p. 8).

Murphy and Ferri (1991) link limited involvement and professional respect to job satisfaction. They argue that "the best predictors of enjoyment and success were appreciation by the university administration and feeling limited by involvement in forensics" (p. 9).

Almost inherent to the role of a director of forensics is an inability to perform at the same level as other colleagues. While this is not an excuse for poor performance in any professional responsibility, it is an argument for a different balance of professional responsibility. Hunt (1993) clearly articulates this realization:

> It is fair to demand excellence of the director of debate lest the director be considered an inferior second class colleague but it is not fair to demand of the director of debate the same teaching, scholarship, and service as other colleagues **plus** five to ten hours a week at forensics meetings, in conferences or practices, or recruiting, **plus** twelve to twenty two to four day tournaments. There needs to be a fair balance of teaching, scholarship, service, and debate established from the beginning... (p. 175).

4. Travel, Time, and Tournament Logistics can Diminish the Enthusiasm and Motivation of Forensic Educators

Gill (1990) argues that "time is the most important reason why coaches quit forensic education" (p. 185). As has already been discussed, the time demands on any forensic educator are enormous. The additional responsibilities of a director of forensics can be even more intimidating to a young educator making the decision of whether or not s/he wants to enter into forensic education. Coaching sessions, administrative responsibilities (budgeting, supervision of staff, etc.), meetings, and tournament travel consume what precious time directors of forensics have at their disposal after performing their other teaching, research, and service responsibilities. While directing forensics at McNeese State University I was asked to account for the number of hours devoted to professional responsibilities during the average week. Some of my colleagues could not comprehend that I spent over 100 hours a week, on average, each semester.

A specific time factor that limits the enthusiasm of some forensic educators is the tournament season itself. Preston (1995) notes that "there are few activities of any sort that start in September and end in May" (p. 17). He adds that "few

jobs require employees to miss virtually all weekends during this time...Many may leave forensics or view it as a stepping stone toward less stressful positions for this reason alone" (p. 17). Hunt (1993) argues that the debate season is too long. His reasoning assumes the forensic educator who focuses on CEDA. Hunt's persuasive arguments for a six month season are even stronger for the educator involved in individual events who is travelling at the end of April and fulfilling a variety of responsibilities during each tournament season.

The tournament itself poses an ominous slate of pressures for the forensic educator. Administering a tournament involves weighing several factors such as judge availability, expenses vs. revenue, and making everything fit within an allotted time frame. As Hunt (1993) urges,

> some of these trade offs need to start being made in favor of the judges/coaches so that people don't think that debate tournaments are only for the young and the strong and the vigorous because no one else could possibly take the pace and the stress and strain (p. 177).

Typical tournaments include schedules that begin at 8:00 and end 12 hours later, little if any break for meals, minimal time between rounds to allow for ballot writing or a relaxed transition from one round another, and heavy judging loads. Forensic educators find themselves balancing the need for themselves and their students to rest, eat, and be competitively prepared. The result is generally poor nutrition, little sleep, and both intellectual and physical exhaustion. Littlefield and Sellnow (1992) note that most forensic educators experience

"difficulties maintaining their healthful habits during forensic tournaments" (p. 6). Their study concludes "that forensic tournaments create an environment that may be conducive to burnout" (p. 8).

5. Directors of Forensics Face Profound Challenges to Their Social Lives and Relationships

Bartanen (1996b) reports that 75% of respondents to her national survey "agreed that work in forensics detracts from time available for family members or other quality relationships" (p. 7). Her research further reports that "nearly an equal proportion perceived that people important to them believe that forensic(s) detracts from quality relationships with them" (p. 7). Additionally, "1 in 5 reported that work in forensics had contributed to the end of a marriage or significant relationship" (p. 7). To suggest that forensic educators face challenges to their interpersonal relationships as a result of their chosen profession is an understatement.

We teach in interpersonal communication that relationships with others is important. One advantage of involvement in forensics is the frequent contact we have with colleagues from other institutions. Additionally, forensic activities can foster meaningful interactions and friendships between educators and students. The reality, however, is that forensic activities perpetuate a limited circle of relationships due to the lack of time available for fostering relationships outside of the forensic arena.

6. Institutional Support Contributes Significantly to the Satisfaction of Forensic Educators and Stability of Programs

As Murphy and Ferri note in their 1991 study, administrative support is paramount in the job satisfaction of forensic educators. Much of Ziegelmueller and Parson's (1984) report at the Second Developmental Conference on Forensics underscores the importance of support and recognition for the forensic program and its educators. They write that "the activity and its educators have a direct responsibility to the department or administrative unit of which they are a part. That responsibility is reciprocal, however, and the conference wished to underscore the importance of that relationship" (p. 38).

Jensen (1993) reports that in the early 1990's most programs operated within a budget of less than $10,000.00. Hunt and Inch (1993) report that at that same time the average budget of a "top 50" program was $37,400.00. Only two programs in their top 50 reported budgets of less than $50,000.00. In short, while many competitively successful programs receive strong financial support, the reality is that most programs are funded in a manner that makes it difficult for them to enjoy 'competitive success' by national standards. It is not my claim that all programs must pursue national calibre successes. It is, however, clear that support in the form of assistant coaches and other resources is frequently a determinant of success. And for the director of forensics who either (1) desires competitive success for his/her program, or (2) is expected by administrators to bring competitive success to the program, a lack of institutional

support is a factor contributing to professional at-riskness.

An additional issue related to institutional support that contributes to at-riskness is the classification of the director of forensics' position. Bartanen's (1996a) research tells us that most of today's forensic educators do not plan to be involved in forensics beyond the next five years. She also reports that most respondents believe that their position will remain a tenure-track appointment. Nonetheless, 15% of respondents to Bartanen's survey feel that the forensic position at their institution will be eliminated when the present director leaves. With an apparent revolving door among our activity's educators, the stability of forensic positions is an important factor in attracting and retaining quality forensic educators. Bartanen (1996a) reports that most forensic educators feel as if their support from colleagues, institutions, and departments is strong. Within these results, however, are areas in which forensic professionals desire more support, including release time, support for on-campus events, and professional development support. Clearly retaining educators and solidifying institutional support are factors that can ease pressures on today's directors of forensics.

Solutions to Reduce At-Riskness

Several factors contribute to the at-riskness of directors of forensics. As such, solutions are not simple. Nonetheless, steps can be taken at both individual and activity levels to curb the potential for burn-out and dissatisfaction among forensic

educators. What follows are ten steps for pre-empting future pressures or responding to already present challenges that face the forensic professional.

1. Forensic Professionals Must be Adequately Trained.

The case for the lack of training as a contributing factor to forensic educator burn-out has already been made. Today's forensic educators must be willing to expose themselves to theories and skills development that can help them to improve as forensic professionals. Likewise, departments granting graduate degrees to future forensic professionals must develop coursework that provides sound pedagogy upon which educators can develop and direct forensic programs. As Jensen (1993) writes, there is "a need to re-evaluate both the means by which we prepare individuals to coach forensics activities and what we expect from forensics professionals" (p. 9). Whether the training be in the capacity of a directing forensics course (Jensen, 1996; Workman, 1996), serving as a graduate assistant (Leland, 1996), or working as an assistant director (Markstrom, 1996), formal training is essential to secure capable, competent, and confident forensic educators.

2. Institutions Should Maintain Evaluation Measures that Acknowledge the Unique Responsibilities of the Forensic Educator

Academic departments and their administrators must recognize that the academic pressures for forensic educators are unique and, as such, should be commensurate but not identical to other educators. By the same token, forensic professionals must not

use their forensic pressures as rationale for not serving their discipline or departments. As Dudczak and Zarefsky (1984) note in their work group report dealing with promotions and tenure standards at the Second National Conference on Forensics, "the purpose of our statement, then, is not to whine about how we are mistreated but to offer special guidelines for use by departments and institutions" (p. 24). Promotion and tenure standards, such as the document from the Quail Roost Conference (AFA Policy Debate Caucus, 1993) should be clearly stated and agreed upon by both the forensic educator and his/her administrators.

3. Forensic Programs Should have Sufficient Staff and Resources

Although directors of forensics don't generally have control over the staff and resources allocated to their programs, forensic professionals must be willing to make the case for sufficient staff and resources for their programs. A wealth of documentation is available that argues what is necessary for programs to be competitive. Educators must use available research to make the case for what other programs have and what their programs (and themselves) need to remain a viable part of the activity (Hunt and Inch, 1993; Jensen, 1993; Burnett-Pettus and Danielson, 1992). Forensic professionals should be willing to tell departments what members of the forensic community already know: one person is not able to carry out all of the responsibilities related to directing, coaching, and educating forensic students. Resources allow professional educators to participate on a level playing field with their colleagues.

Staffing allows forensic directors to share burdens with colleagues, creating an atmosphere with reduced pressures for all professionals involved.

4. Standards and Policies can Provide Structure and Efficiency to Forensic Programs, Helping to Ease Administrative Pressures for Directors

Bartanen (1996a) reports that most forensic educators feel that the objectives of their program are not clearly understood by colleagues. Even more respondents to her survey report that students on their campus understand the goals of the forensics program. These findings underscore the importance of goals, a mission statement, and standards for forensic programs. Forensic educators are faced with enough difficult choices in the day to day operations of a forensic program. A framework within which policies are outlined and understood can ease the pressure of having to make decisions relating to preparation of students, discipline issues, academic progress of team members, etc. While it may well be impossible to encompass all potential issues, being able to communicate a philosophy and guidelines for program participation allows (1) students to make informed choices regarding their choosing to participate in the program, and (2) directors to be confident in their decisions, knowing that all members of the program know its policies. Standards and policies documents enable directors of forensics to function in what Rhodes (1990) calls the "business of coaching" (p. 18).

5. A Shorter Forensics Tournament Season, Combined with Humane Tournament Structures, Will Curb Potential Burn-Out Factors Among Forensic Educators

There is no reasonable argument as to why an eight or nine month forensic season wherein forensic professionals travel to 15 to 20 tournaments, each featuring two or three 12 hour days, along with driving and the stress of the competitive atmosphere is conducive to job satisfaction, good health, or a desire to make a long-term professional commitment to forensics. The solution is found in a broader form of a resolution stemming from Steve Hunt's paper at the 1991 CEDA Assessment Conference:

> RESOLVED: that CEDA [the forensic community] should encourage guidelines for gracious tournaments including decent meal and snack breaks, adequate sleeping time, and extra judges to allow for the rotation of judges giving judges occasional rounds off each day (1993, p. 180).

The solution seems obvious, but its implementation is problematic. Tournaments will not become more humane until the forensic community is willing to accept the necessary trade offs. Tournament weekends may need to be longer. Fewer rounds of debate may need to be offered. Judging fees may need to increase to provide incentives for programs to cover their entries at tournaments. Competitors and educators may need to be accepting of more diverse judging pools, including lay judges in debate and individual events. Programs may need to be tolerant of scheduling individual events and debate concurrently as a way to limit the number of total rounds held each day. The bottom line is that our tournament administration norms must change, but not before our community is ready to accept the implications of those changes. Most importantly, our tournament structure and competitive season must change in an effort to alleviate the at-

riskness of today's forensic educators.

6. Directors of Forensics Must Work to Insure that Their Professional Lives do not Dominate Their Personal Lives

As the phrase goes, "All work and no play..." Today's directors of forensics must recognize the potential for their careers to shape their lives both in and out of the forensic arena. Most responsible forensic educators tell their students that academic progress should be their top priority, and that social lives are healthy. The most persuasive reasons for forensic educators to develop healthy personal lives outside their professional responsibilities are (1) to reduce their professional at-riskness, and (2) to set an example of a healthy lifestyle for students in their program.

To some extent the director of forensics will necessarily have a more hectic professional life than the more traditional educator. Bartanen (1996b) notes that most forensic educators are married. But as reported, several forensic professionals indicate that forensics has contributed to the termination of a marriage or significant relationship in their life. As consuming as forensics can be, directors must begin to make their own personal health and happiness a priority--even if that means the program makes a sacrifice. Serving students should be a high priority in the decisions that directors of forensics make. But programs have lives beyond the individual students in them. Preserving the long-term professional life of the program's director best serves students.

Professional development programs such as sabbaticals can

help to maintain professional energy and activity within professional interests outside of the daily forensic routine. Taking certain days or evenings of the week for "personal time" can provide a release away from forensics. Some forensic educators even coach together (G. Jensen, 1996; Whitney and Johnson, 1996), or include their families in some forensic functions. Students should see their coaches/mentors taking proactive steps to secure a healthy personal life that does not center around forensics. Directors of forensics should strive for a lifestyle that enables them to avoid seemingly inevitable burn-out factors associated with drowning in forensic responsibilities.

7. Directors of Forensics Need to Make Wise Choices, and Be Cognizant of the Implications of Their Choices

Perhaps the most intuitive solution is saved for last. Schnoor and Alexander (1997) discuss professionalism and forensics in their paper delivered at the 1997 National Developmental Conference on Individual Events. They point out that "our students are aware of the choices we make" (p. 6). There are clearly problems within today's world of forensics. As was argued at the onset of this paper, contextual/environmental factors are at the heart of professional at-riskness of today's director of forensics. But we as forensic educators are not blind to these potential burn-out factors. While many of the problems outlined in this paper are difficult or impossible to avoid, forensic programs can choose to minimize the extent to which their students and professional staffs are negatively

affected.

The director of forensics is ultimately responsible for the direction of his/her program, and the potential impact of the program on its participants. Today's forensic educator must become responsible for taking necessary precautions so as to remain motivated in their professional responsibilities. More likely than not, tomorrow's forensic educators become enchanted with a future in forensics through their experiences in our programs. If our choices lead to burn-out of today's forensic professional, what reason is there to be optimistic about recruiting and retaining forensic professionals for tomorrow?

Summary

Directors of forensics have been classified as being professionally at-risk. While forensics remains an invaluable experience for both its student and professional participants, several factors exist that perpetuate dissatisfaction and potential burn-out among its educators. Primary contributors to at-riskness vary, as do remedies for such pressures. Steps can be taken to diminish the negative influences today's forensic activities have on program directors.

Answers to alleviating professional pressures facing forensic educators are not easy to come by. Putting solutions into place to prevent at-riskness is even more difficult. Ultimately forensic educators must assume responsibility for making choices that preserve the health of their programs, their students, and their own personal and professional futures.

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